



## **Resolving The "People Pleasing" Pattern In Our Relationships**

### *Introduction: A Hypothetical Situation*

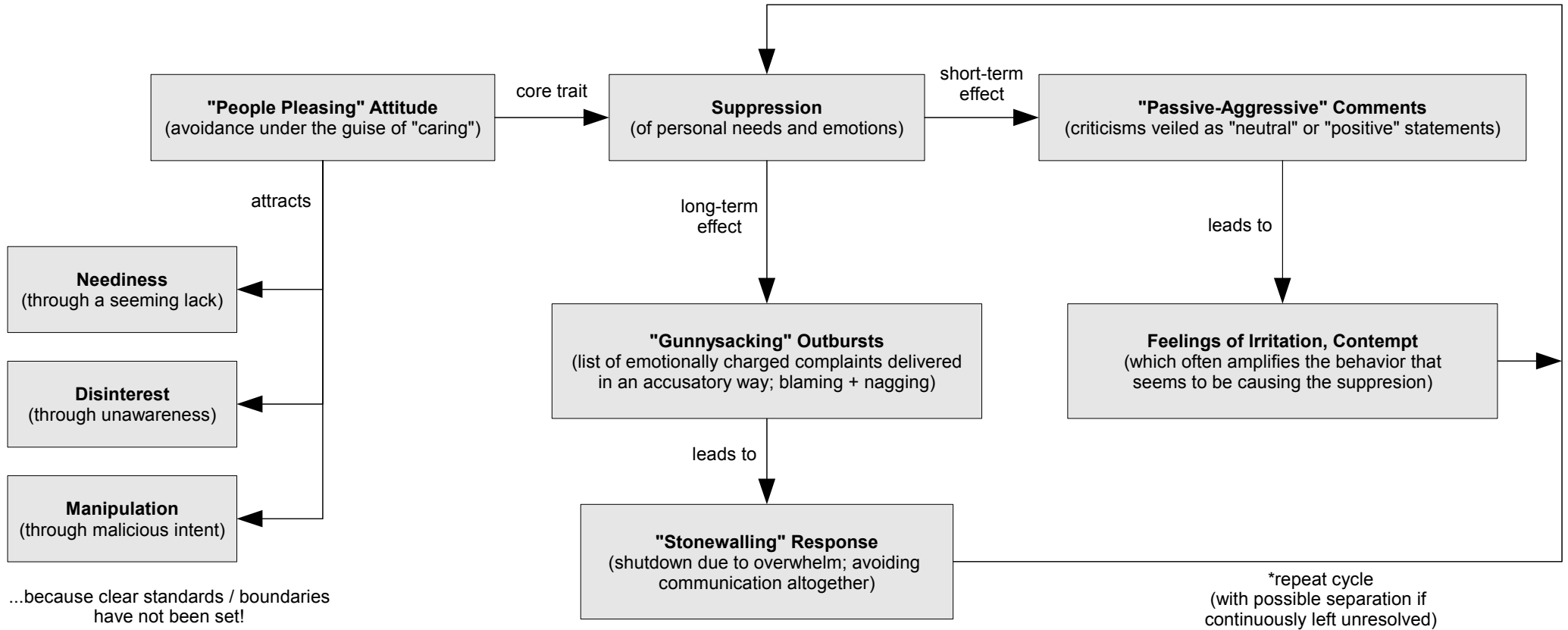
We will define the term "people pleaser" as one who suppresses themselves in an attempt to please others. Such an attitude often sets up a cycle that cannot be sustained.

For example, people might come to expect a certain set of behaviors that can actually lead another to become exhausted. A reasonable limit was not set from the beginning. Therefore, resentments start to build up between them:

- Disappointment occurs from the one who's expectations are no longer met, but they may not be able to articulate exactly why they feel that way (e.g.: "You've changed!").
- Frustration occurs from the one who is too tired to comply, but also too scared to say why. Instead, they silently suffer while assassinating another's character in their own mind. (e.g.: "They are such an ingrate, even after everything I have done for them!").

While the exact details will differ according to each relationship, this "Gordian Knot of People Pleasing" often leads to a familiar dynamic within relationships in general. Let's take a closer look at it...

# The Gordian Knot of "People Pleasing"



## Steps To Resolution:

- Carefully differentiate between legitimate needs and unreasonable demands in yourself and in relation to others.

- Acknowledge your feelings and make clear requests. Provide invitations for mutual exploration.

You cannot complain that your needs are not being met if you have not been plain about what they are and have asked straightforwardly if another is willing to reciprocate.

*Summary Poem:*

When suppressing oneself in an attempt to be "kind"  
 resentments build up and play tricks on the mind:  
 Emotional outbursts due to overwhelming feelings;  
 Passive-aggression driving others up walls and to ceilings.

*Moral:*

Relationships are defined by mutuality, reciprocity, balance.

Now that we have an overview of how it destructively impacts our relationships, let's try to find its causes and attempt to resolve them.

### *Exploring The Mindset & Its Effects*

Although we might not be consciously aware of it, the development of a "people pleasing" attitude often arises out of fear. We might try hard to fulfill other's needs at the expense of our own in order to maintain the illusion of peace within our relationships. However, accommodations made in order to be sympathetic and compromises made in order to placate are quite different from one another.

Accommodation is understanding and respecting that others can have healthy behaviors that are just different in expression from our own, whereas compromise is to have nebulous boundaries that others often cross (whether intentionally or unintentionally) because we do not bother to enforce them.

When we do not actively enforce these boundaries, some people may be drawn to us for different reasons:

- Some may feel an emotional lack within themselves and want to attach to someone who seems to be continuously giving. This is sometimes referred to as an "energetic vampire", a person who leaves us feeling emotionally drained after we are around them for awhile. They seem to take more than they give in return.
- Some may be completely unconcerned about our needs, not necessarily because they don't care, but because they have not been made fully aware of them. People are often so focused on what is going on within themselves and their own life that they become oblivious to the needs of those around them. We might take others for granted, or be taken for granted ourselves.
- Some may be very aware of the fact that clear standards of acceptable behavior have not been set, so they will use it as an excuse to take advantage of us, try to control us, or to put us down in some way in an attempt to make themselves feel better. They bully and manipulate others out of personal insecurity, and/or have adapted to dealing with relationships in this manner in general (i.e.: as a "defense mechanism").

All of these relationship dynamics can be quite toxic and harmful to all involved. Unfortunately, as much as we may like to believe that all people are inherently "good", not everyone may necessarily hold the "best" of intentions towards us under every circumstance. We must be discerning and get to know ourselves and the people that we interact with thoroughly.

## *Developing A Healthy Self-Image*

Self-image is not necessarily how we see ourselves, or even how we think others see us. It isn't puffing up oneself with pride to try to feel better about ourselves, nor is it determining our worth through a comparison with others or some arbitrary measure of one's accomplishments (e.g.: job title, number of possessions, amount of influence, looks of mate, etc.). It is an honest assessment of our strengths and weaknesses in order to implement behavior founded upon respect, both towards ourselves and others simultaneously.

When we approach this task with sincerity, we begin to ask ourselves questions like: "When does adapting to circumstances become neglecting my own needs? Am I even aware of what those needs are and how to fulfill them in constructive ways?", "What are that person's needs and are they compatible with my own? If not, why not?", "How can I respect myself and other people at the same time? How can I create mutually beneficial situations that are truly constructive?", etc.

This type of self-questioning can help uncover all sorts of "harsh realities" and personal insecurities if we don't shy away from the uncomfortable truths that might come up. A truth only hurts if we are thoroughly invested in a lie, and anything founded upon lies can never lead to a lasting happiness. Here are a couple of examples of the destructive ways in which we might present ourselves:

- **The Chameleon Persona** – Sometimes people compromise in order to keep other people in their lives (whether lovers, family members, friends, or business partners). They crave acceptance so much that they try to become whatever they perceive of as "wanted" or "desired". They might follow all of the popular trends, regularly cave into peer pressure, keep their true selves hidden in silence, continually acquiesce to unreasonable demands placed upon them, etc. But compromise can become a slippery slope. If our personality is so amorphous that we can become whatever is necessary in order to fit in with others, at what point are we becoming a liar and giving up our authenticity? Again, placating in order to create a false sense of peace is often driven by fear. We must have the courage to be ourselves while also respecting everyone else.
- **The Perfectionist Persona** – It is constructive to strive towards growth as a person and to encourage others to do the same, but at what point does a reasonable standard become an unreasonable demand? Sometimes we ask for things that we are unwilling to do ourselves. Other times, people try very hard to be the "perfect" spouse, child, sibling, friend, worker, etc. But "perfect" in reference to what? Nothing which brings harm to ourselves and/or another person could ever be considered "perfect".

So, how do we transform these ways of presenting ourselves?

### *Assessment of Personal Needs, Managing Thoughts-Feelings, & Creating Clear Boundaries*

There is a difference between a "want" (i.e.: something that someone would enjoy, but not imperative to have or receive) and a "need" (i.e.: something necessary for continued survival and sustainment). In the case of relationships, there are mental-emotional wants and needs that each person involved must become aware of. These usually differ from person-to-person, so only self-honesty and deep introspection can make our personal needs clear to us. However, this might seem difficult if we are in the habit of suppressing them. The repression of needs often does not occur intentionally. We may have gotten so caught up in trying to "be nice" or the "perfect" [blank] that we cannot clearly distinguish what our proper role within a relationship is. One of the first steps to understanding that role is to look at the concepts of **empathy**, **overcare**, **pity**, and **compassion**:

**Empathy** is attempting to understand another's experience as they have experienced it. We do not assume anything, but listen fully and observe carefully. Then, we ask questions to check that understanding. Sometimes this turns into **"overcare"**, when our concern about another's experience overwhelms us. We become so influenced by their emotional state that we cannot engage them without "walking on eggshells" (i.e.: being overly cautious of hurting their feelings to the point where we suppress ourselves). "Walking on eggshells" can be tiring for both the one doing it and the person that they are doing it towards, even if it is done "with the best of intentions". Although it may seem difficult sometimes, we should always try to keep our composure, staying calm and becoming well informed before making any decisions. Remember, peace and patience can help situations, while worry just causes stress that does not help anyone.

Further, obsessing over another's safety, health, or well-being can sometimes degrade from being caring into becoming controlling. This is reflected within the familiar saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions". "Good intentions" should never take away another's ability to make self-responsible decisions. Not everything is within our control or influence. We cannot make choices for another, even if we are arrogant enough to believe that we "know" their lives better than they do.

Inversely, **pity** is to "feel bad" for another. "Feeling bad" for someone does not help heal their hurts. Joy is a virtue because how we choose to carry ourselves can help others to find that strength within themselves; we live by example and give support when asked and allowed to do so. Keep in mind that support is not giving "unwanted advice". Some people talk about their troubles as a means of showing vulnerability and being intimate, not because they necessarily want or need help.

In general, pity (towards self or others) makes little sense. Since we always take our ways of thinking, feeling, and doing with

us, there is no escaping the consequences that arise from them. It does little good to blame anyone or anything else for our own choices. Likewise, attempting to live another's life for them can never work out, no matter how much we may care about them. Any lasting change must be internally motivated. Therefore, never pity another, but always encourage self-empowerment motivated by humility and grace. This leads us to compassion.

**Compassion** is to choose to sincerely help others based on what we have learned from empathy, and without succumbing to the tendency for "overcare" or pity.

We are all connected, and therefore, we should treat *all* with compassion (especially by helping those less fortunate than us when we truly have any capacity to do so, no matter how small or insignificant that help may seem). However, this should be done out of choice, not because it is forced upon us by social obligations or by one who thinks they are morally "superior", and without abusing ourselves or allowing ourselves to be abused by those who would take advantage of that compassion.

Sometimes we "learn the hard way" that not everyone will appreciate the kindness that is shown them, or worse, that there are people who will purposely try to manipulate others by appealing to their sense of empathy. None of those encounters should make us regret treating anyone with kindness (including those who have "wronged" us), as they can only make us more discerning in how to appropriately express it in each situation. Whether we assume the "worst" or "best" of others, it is still an assumption. Therefore, we must not overgeneralize based upon our personal experiences and take each interaction on a case-by-case basis. It is not an issue of being someone being "worthy", but one of caring.

Once we are clear on empathy and compassion, then we can focus on giving and receiving in a way that reflects their truth.

### *The Nature of Giving & Receiving*

Receiving something constructive should always be met with an expression of gratitude and reciprocation. Yet, offering something to another with an ulterior motive is not giving but an expectation. We give in order to share something constructive, not always to receive something in return.

When giving, one should not become exhausted. Is the limit that we have reached a reasonable call to rest, or a withholding done in an attempt to manipulate? What is the intention behind it? Likewise, things can be smothered by too much attention, and others can wither from neglect. Where is the balance? Which criteria does each person use to determine that they are being smothered or neglected? There are many questions that can bring giving and receiving into mutual balance.

In general, there is both a reason for giving/receiving and a way to give/receive, and they must each be constructive and complementary to one another. This is true for any type of interchange, whether we are referring to gifts or having a conversation. A conversation is comprised of *both* listening *and* speaking. We should be sensitive to other's thoughts-feelings, carefully listening to the truth that they have to share, and always humbly sharing what has been helpful to us merely for the sake that others might benefit as well. Let's explore a few tools for doing this effectively...

### *Tools For Communication*

• **The "Time-Out" Guideline** – When frustrated or "stressed out", it is often difficult for people to articulate their thoughts with tact or listen with consideration. At these moments it is important to have a means of collecting ourselves before continuing on. *Politely*, and with the *sincere reassurance of its importance to you*, postpone the conversation for a *specific time* as you attempt to *regain composure*. After you have done so, *keep your word* and reconvene at the agreed upon time.

By making an effort to be polite when we are overwhelmed and giving the reassurance that the conversation truly is important to us, we show sincere care for that person. When we follow through on a mutually agreed upon time, we demonstrate that we are true to our word and embrace responsibility for our part in the situation. And by taking a moment to regain our composure before speaking carelessly, we give a valid reason to temporarily postpone conversation (i.e.: to take care of our mental-emotional needs in a way that is respectful towards everyone).

What we do to collect ourselves can take on many forms: writing, praying, meditating, having a healthy meal, taking a nap, etc. Find out what will work best for you in this specific situation while making it plain that you are not ignoring it.

• **The "Rude vs. Assertive" Concept** – The foundation of all relationships is open and honest communication done with tact and consideration. Secrecy, lies, hurtful and careless comments (such as name-calling / insults) have no place within it. Do not mistake rudeness for "honesty". We can be assertive and considerate at the same time. They are not mutually exclusive things. Both are important and necessary. What does it mean to be "assertive" in this instance? It is to speak:

- clearly (without mumbling)
- simply (without jargon)
- directly (without metaphors)
- calmly (without attacking – either by raising one's voice or by saying something insulting through our words / tone)

If we want to be understood, we must speak in a way that the person listening will be able to receive our message. And if we are hurtful or argumentative, people often shut-down no matter how "true" or "right" we think we are. "Assertiveness" is not being forceful or domineering.

• **The "Request" Template** – There is a way of formatting our requests so that they are clear to both persons:

"Could you please do [concrete, observable action]<sup>1</sup>?  
It helps me feel [positive, constructive feeling]<sup>2</sup> because [reason, association, relationship]<sup>3</sup>.

Here are some check questions to make sure that these requests are realistic:

- Are you also willing to do 1? You cannot ask for something that you won't also do yourself.
- Is 1 a reasonable request? Is it possible and are they capable of doing it?
- How are 1 and 2 linked together by 3? Is 2 actually related to 1 in a way that makes sense or does one of them need to change?

*Conclusion: In Summary*

Through exploring our own mindset and the types of relationships around us, developing a healthy self-image by resolving any destructive persona that we might be holding on to, assessing our personal needs and managing our thoughts-feelings, creating clear boundaries by looking at how we give and receive in empathy and compassion, and using tools that help us to communicate more effectively, we can cut through "*The Gordian Knot of People Pleasing*" and untangle the confusion within ourselves and our relationships. We hope this document was and continues to be helpful. Thank you for reading!

